

ST IGNATIUS' RULES FOR THINKING WITH THE CHURCH

Spiritual Direction for a Synodal Church

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I FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE PHRASE 'Thinking with the Church' when I attended the beatification celebrations for Oscar Romero in Rome in 2018. It was featured on T-shirts and a vast array of merchandise. The phrase had been Romero's episcopal ordination motto: *sentir con la Iglesia*.¹ Though I did not at that time give much thought to the meaning of the term, I did wonder if the phrase could really mean that decisions I might make, after careful discernment, ultimately had to be in harmony with the teachings or the magisterium of a Church which, in many ways, has lost institutional trust and credibility. Susan Wood highlights contemporary obstacles and challenges to serious engagement with such rules: 'To feel with the church in these days of ecclesiastical political intrigue and of the crisis of sexual abuse and its mishandling by bishops and cardinals is to feel pain, rage and shame'.²

Elizabeth Liebert and Annemarie Paulin-Campbell point out that many spiritual directors see Ignatius' eighteen 'Rules for Thinking with the Church' as outdated and lacking in usefulness, particularly for contemporary women who experience themselves as marginalised or alienated from the Church. For these reasons, such directors do not address the Rules.³ George Ganss proposes that Ignatius meant them to be merely an appendix to the Exercises.⁴ However, George Schemel

¹ See Ned Lunn, 'To What Extent Did Oscar Romero Remain Faithful to His Episcopal Motto "Sentir con la Iglesia"?' available at <https://www.nedlunn.com/2021/03/24/to-what-extent-did-oscar-romero-remain-faithful-to-his-episcopal-motto-sentir-con-la-iglesia/>.

² Susan K. Wood, 'Thinking and Feeling with the Church (*sentire cum ecclesia*)', *Ecclesiology*, 15/1 (2019), 3–6, here 3.

³ Elizabeth Liebert and Annemarie Paulin-Campbell, 'Black Appearing White: Rules for Thinking with the Church', in *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women*, 2nd edn, edited by Annemarie Paulin-Campbell and Elizabeth Liebert (New York: Paulist, 2022), 256.

⁴ George E. Ganss, 'Thinking with the Church: The Spirit of St Ignatius' Rules', *The Way Supplement*, 20 (Autumn 1973), 72–82, here 73.

and Judith Roemer urge directors not to avoid engaging with these rules entirely, and John O'Malley even sees the rules as the culmination of the Exercises.⁵ Schemel and Roemer do insist that they should be engaged with in a time of spiritual consolation, given their capacity to trigger directees who have perhaps been hurt or disillusioned with aspects of the Church's life and practice.⁶

Rule 13 stands out as particularly challenging for contemporary directees and directors: 'What seems to me to be white, I will believe to be black if the hierarchical Church thus determines it' (Exx 365). As O'Malley provocatively asks: 'Do St Ignatius' "Rules for Thinking with the Church" call for blind orthodoxy?'

The Spirit of the Rules

Even as 'additional material' to the Spiritual Exercises, George Ganss believes that these rules have relevance for directors and directees in offering 'an example and a challenge to retreatants of every age to try to diagnose the chief ills of their era, and then prayerfully to devise habitual attitudes and practical procedures for living among them'. He argues that Ignatius intended the rules to be offered to ecclesial leaders for making decisions about, with or as the Church precisely with this goal. He proposes that such 'rules' are better understood as 'directives, suggestions, guides, patterns' rather than authoritarian pronouncements.⁷ Ganss affirms that since the Exercises as a whole are 'a set of guidelines to be used with flexibility rather than a legal document', the Rules for Thinking with the Church should be understood in the same way.⁸

Ladislav Örsy goes further in proposing that directors actively engage in the creative act of formulating their own contemporary rules for thinking with the Church with their directees. This could strengthen their own, as well as their directees', sense of what the Church means for them today. I propose that Ignatius' descriptor of the sixteenth-century Church as *militant*, in the throes of crisis during the Reformation and the rise of humanism, would be best replaced by that of the Church *synodal*, inspired by the post-Vatican II vision of Pope Francis.

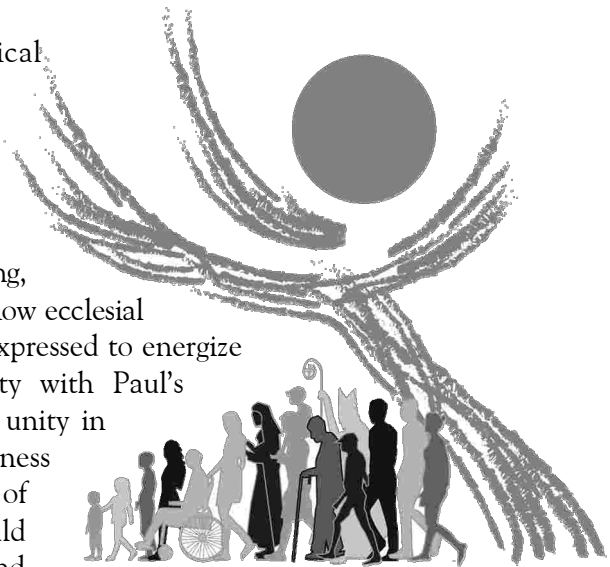
⁵ George Schemel and Judith Roemer, *Beyond Individuation to Discipleship* (Scranton: Institute for Contemporary Spirituality, 2000), 145; John W. O'Malley, 'Do St Ignatius' "Rules for Thinking with the Church" Call for Blind Orthodoxy?' *America* (28 February 2019).

⁶ Schemel and Roemer, *Beyond Individuation*, 145.

⁷ Ganss, 'Thinking with the Church', 82, 72.

⁸ George E. Ganss, 'St Ignatius' Rules for Thinking with the Church', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 7/1 (1975), 13.

Örsy's creative and dialogical approach to interpreting the rules already envisions such a synodal path. He begins with St Paul's ways of thinking about the church in Corinth. For Paul, this involved considering, first in a local church context, how ecclesial unity can be understood and expressed to energize mission. In creative continuity with Paul's emphasis on the Church as a unity in diversity, Örsy calls for an alertness today to the presence and work of the Spirit. He asks: 'What should I do in my particular, concrete and personal circumstances to be one



The Church's logo for the Synodal Path

with the church?'⁹ The question can be further expanded to promote synodal discernment: what should the Church do to be 'in unity' with me or with us such that our unique particularities are not erased?

Recontextualising the Rules

For Ignatius' rules to help breathe a synodal spirit into the Church today, 'to think with the Church' might be best understood as 'to sense' (*sentir*) with and as Church about the needs of our time and how we are called to make a difference as followers of Christ. Today, as in Ignatius' time, directors and directees are called to discern, where the Spirit is leading the Church and those who seek to know God's dream for Christ's body in the midst of history. How can we better know ourselves and others as on a journey, each and together endowed with a sense of faith (*sensus fidelium*) that enables and commissions us to critique, discern and act with humility and integrity? How can we think of ourselves as and with the Church today, as and with the whole People of God?

From this perspective, the Rules for Thinking with the Church can be recontextualised for our time and place. Gerald Arbuckle provides a helpful affirmation of the appropriateness of 'dissent' in the quest to 'think' or 'sense' with the Church in a recontextualised way: 'dissent is

⁹ Ladislav Örsy, 'On Being One with the Church Today', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 7/1 (1975), 40, and see 31.

the prophetic move by people who genuinely love the gospel and the Church to offer reasonable alternative ways of preaching the good news to the world of our time'.¹⁰ Dissent as a way of thinking with the Church seems the antithesis of Ignatius' rules for his time. It seems Ignatius was sensing that the Church needed greater assent to several features of Roman Catholic life and practice that were under threat. And yet, commentators agree that Rule 13 (white is black) was actually a form of dissent in the wake of emerging Lutheran doctrinal positions that denied the real presence of Christ in the outward appearance of what can only be seen as or believed to be bread and wine.¹¹

Örsy's recontextualising work inspires the following possibilities for creating ways of being one with the Church today that could bring about prophetic and practical renewal of ecclesial identity and mission. I could grow in my capacity to sense with the Church when:¹²

1. I develop an interior alertness to the movements of grace in myself and in the life of the Church that come from the Spirit.
2. I am one with a mystery that exists in human form in time and space. The Church itself is both a divine mystery and a context-bound, human-inspired—and marred—phenomenon. The mystery of the Church can reveal itself to me as a call and a surprise that can be transformative.
3. I seek greater understanding of this mystery and am prophetically courageous in speaking of it.
4. I know that if I hold authority in the Church, I hold it in trust and must use it according to the heart and mind of God.
5. I honour all charisms given for the good of the Church.
6. I recognise that weaknesses in the Church need to be addressed and transformed through truthfulness, compassion and healing.
7. I know that the greater good may sometimes need personal sacrifices, including those of personal plans and cherished institutional expressions.

¹⁰ Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church: Dissent for Leadership* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 9.

¹¹ O'Malley, 'Do St Ignatius' "Rules for Thinking with the Church" Call for Blind Orthodoxy?'

¹² This list has drawn on and been developed from Örsy, 'On Being One with the Church Today', and Liebert and Paulin-Campbell, 'Black Appearing White'.

8. I hear and respond to the cries of the poor and those hungering for justice and healing of divisions.
9. I have authentic and faith-inspired reasons for the hope I offer to others and ground my hope in the story of Jesus.
10. I speak the truth as best I understand it.
11. I bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, set the downtrodden free (Luke 4: 18–19). I am a sign of healing and reconciliation.
12. I work for unity among all in the Church, among churches and with all people of good will. I seek to heal divisions and not be a cause of division.
13. I promote cultural progress and offer ways to discern and respond to whether certain expressions of progress offer consolation or desolation to our world.

Liebert and Paulin-Campbell affirm the value and relevance of recontextualising Ignatius' Rules for Thinking with the Church within the contemporary experience of spiritual direction. Such work supports the self-understanding of spiritual directors who must realise and accept their 'inescapable role as a representative of the church'.¹³ It also offers support for those who come to spiritual direction or the Spiritual Exercises seeking help relating discipleship to a relationship with the Church.

In the table that follows I have laid out the main thrust of the Rules for Thinking with the Church—as expounded by St Ignatius, by David Fleming in his *Contemporary Reading*, and by Liebert and Paulin-Campbell.¹⁴ A fourth column is provided for recontextualising exploration between a director and directee as appropriate during spiritual direction. I offer some tentative suggestions in this column, as a potential director seeking to support directees to think or sense with the Church today in ways that can animate a spirit of ecclesial hope and service, and a sense of personal value for the life and mission of the Church.

¹³ Liebert and Paulin-Campbell, 'Black Appearing White', 272, drawing on the work of Fredrik Heiding.

¹⁴ The first column contains text from the Ganss translation of the *Spiritual Exercises*; the second is based on David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises. A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 281–291; the third is based on Liebert and Paulin-Campbell, 'Black Appearing White'.

[352]	To have the genuine attitude which we ought to maintain in the Church militant ...	Guidelines for thinking with the Church today (adapted from Fleming)
[353] (1st rule)	Be ready and prompt to obey all that the hierarchical Church teaches.	When legitimate authority speaks within the Church, listen with receptive ears.
[354] (2nd rule)	Praise confession and the Eucharist.	Encourage more personal involvement in the sacraments.
[355] (3rd rule)	Praise prayers and the Divine Office.	Praise and reverence the prayer life of the Church.
[356] (4th rule)	Praise religious orders, virginity and continence more than marriage.	Praise and esteem all vocations as God-given.
[357] (5th rule)	Praise religious vows (poverty chastity, obedience) over states of life that do not allow the perfection to which these vows lead such as being in business or married.	Praise vowed religious life as a special call to witness to God's reign in a world whose value system stands in contrast to that witness.
[358] (6th rule)	Praise relics of saints, participate in pilgrimages, indulgences, candle-lighting in church.	Have a loving reverence for the communion of saints. Pray for their support and concern for our lives.
[359] (7th rule)	Praise fasting and penances.	Respond freely to abstinence and fasting. Find ways to carry our cross daily in following Jesus.
[360] (8th rule)	Praise ornaments and church buildings. Venerate them for what they represent.	Show respect for places of worship, statues, paintings and decorations. Beautify them.

A contemporary reading of the Rules for Thinking with the Church (adapted from Liebert and Paulin-Campbell)	Preliminary suggestions for exploring rules for thinking with the Church synodal in spiritual direction
Be open and obedient to the vision of Vatican II and of Pope Francis for how the Church can be in dialogue with the contemporary world.	Pray over and respond to the reality that 'the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members are called together to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God's will'. ¹⁵
Understand the Church to be a sacrament of unity and advocate liturgical renewal so that its sacramental life is accessible to all.	Offer mercy to the world in need. This is the mission of the Church. How can mercy be a source of healing, unity and renewal?
Advocate church renewal based on faith, individual and communal spirituality, and a holiness that transforms the world.	Affirm and encourage the <i>sensus fidelium</i> of the whole people of God. How can prayer strengthen my search for truth?
Affirm that holiness is lived out in a variety of lifestyles. Reject concepts of higher and lower states of life.	Be in inclusive and creative solidarity with the whole people of God in a spirit of commitment, humility and service.
Affirm the worth of various states of life in order to value intentional Christian living and discipleship rooted in baptismal commitment.	Respond to our call to co-responsibility for the mission of the Church. Engage in discernment, decision-making and implementation on behalf of the mission of the Church.
Confirm the importance of the communion of saints in a pilgrim Church and value the diversity of their lives and faith stories and our own.	Call upon the communion of saints whose inspiration and prayerful support accompany us on our walk together in history.
Affirm the value of spiritual disciplines as formative for Christian life.	Engage in the asceticism of respectful, humble listening to others, especially to the poor and those whose voices are silenced. Make room within myself to encounter grace and practise hospitality.
Value the sacramental and symbolic aspect of worship and recognise the whole person at prayer.	Create and inhabit places of deep encounter. Affirm that 'the path to our relation with God passes through our relation with human beings and most especially through the relation with those whom the judgement of the mighty has reduced to less than nothing'. ¹⁶

¹⁵ International Theological Commission, 'Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church', 2 March 2018, n. 68.

¹⁶ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995), 187.

[361] (9th rule)	Praise all the precepts of the Church; come to their defence when they are attacked.	Maintain proper respect for the laws and rules of the Church and respond with all our heart.
[362] (10th rule)	Find good and praise in our superiors. Don't speak against them publicly, even if warranted, so as to cause scandal. Speak in private to those with whom you find fault.	Be more ready to give support and approval to leaders, both in their personal conduct and their directives, than to find fault in them. Disunity is caused by public criticism. The remedy for wrong, harmful, unjust situations is to refer them to those who can do something about them.
[363] (11th rule)	Praise scholastic learning and positive theology. The scholastic authorities are modern and help our understanding of scripture and the Church.	Praise and respect theologians in the Church, especially those who have given a positive and scholastic doctrine. They expose error and uphold the legacy of those who have gone before them such that tradition is understood to develop.
[364] (12th rule)	Be on guard against comparing those of us alive now as superior in knowledge and holiness to the blessed who have passed away.	Do not exaggerate the contribution of a particular person in our time as more holy than others who have come before them and thus exalt our own leaders and their practices as automatically superior to those who have come before.
[365] (13th rule)	To be right in everything, we ought always to hold that the white that I see is black, if the hierarchical Church so decides. By the same Spirit and our Lord who gave the ten commandments, our holy mother the Church is directed and governed.	The Spirit is present in all members of the Church and is present in a special way to guide the leaders of the Church for the good of all. We should explore why the Church teaches as it does on certain matters and be more open to acknowledge the limitations of how we see things before dismissing or critiquing official directions about those issues.
[366] (14th rule)	Be very cautious of speaking of predestination.	God wants all to be saved and God has given us freedom to choose our destiny. Do not deny either of these.

<p>Affirm Vatican II and other contemporary statements of faith as human articulations of a search for truth and life in dialogue with the world.</p>	<p>Denounce life-denying power arrangements in the Church and in the world. If you exercise public responsibility, ‘smell like your sheep’: walk with them in their joys, sorrow, griefs and anxieties.</p>
<p>Encourage leadership in the Church and remind all of their responsibility to address the reasons for and consequences of harm done in the name of the Church.</p>	<p>Engage in discernment so that the Church as the whole People of God can speak and act with the good spirit. Contribute to the growth of ecclesial governance that is transparent and accountable to the whole and that calls members of the People of God to coresponsibility and participation.</p>
<p>Encourage a variety of theological voices from both the centre and the margins—all remaining in creative tension with one another and thus illuminating the dynamic mystery of God always at work among us.</p>	<p>Generate new ways of learning from and relating to those who have walked the journey of faith in the past, who walk with you in the present and for whom you leave a legacy for the future.</p>
<p>Discourage holding up present-day persons and practices for adulation so that the people and traditions of the past are disparaged.</p>	<p>Engage in dialogue and works of mercy among and as the people of God, including and with bishops and the Pope.</p>
<p>Stress the ability of the Holy Spirit to work with even the most discordant and discrepant views to draw deeper unity. The Holy Spirit works in the Church beyond individual perceptions and constructions.</p>	<p>Respond to the synodal vision of the Church led by Pope Francis: ‘A church weighed down by structures, bureaucracy and formalism will struggle to walk in history at the pace of the Spirit, meeting the men and women of our time. “The great enemy of this process, he said, “is fear”’.¹⁷</p>
<p>Encourage speaking and writing about how grace and free will work together for the salvation of the world.</p>	<p>Encourage reflection on the Church and our own spiritual journeys as dynamic, open to growth and led by hope.</p>

¹⁷ Catholic News Service, ‘Pope Francis Explains: A Synodal Church Is Such because It Cultivates “Creativity Proper to Those Who Bear Witness to the Good News of God’s Love”’ (25 May 2023), at <https://www.catholicnewsworld.com/2023/05/pope-francis-explains-synodal-church-is.html>.

[367] (15th rule)	Do not teach people to believe that they are already saved or condemned and thus that there is no more they can do in terms of good works. This encourages laziness and negligence of responsibility.	We must work out our salvation over our whole lifetime and try to avoid the extremes of pessimism to the point of despair or the presumptuousness of thinking we can effect our own salvation through our own efforts.
[368] (16th rule)	Be on guard not to talk too much of faith such that people will be lazy and slothful in works.	We can so stress the importance of faith in God and God's grace for our salvation that we ignore the necessity of our daily efforts of active love for our neighbour and the world.
[369] (17th rule)	Works and free will are not to be discarded in favour of insistence on the importance of faith and grace.	We can so stress the power of grace that we can fail to take human means to remedy physical, psychological and spiritual evils. We should take responsibility for our freedom to choose among the various means for our growth and development.
[370] (18th rule)	We ought to praise God out of pure love, fear of His Divine Majesty. This helps us get out of mortal sin. Filial fear is as acceptable a way of loving God as is being at one with the Divine Love.	We can overstress the motivation of love being at the centre of our Christian lives and in this way ignore the value of Christian fear which can also motivate us toward growth and development in Christ.

When asked about his interpretation of Ignatius' expression 'thinking with the Church' for today, Pope Francis connected the image of the Church from *Lumen gentium* n.12 with his vision for the growth of a synodal Church:

The people themselves are the subject. And the church is the people of God on the journey through history with joys and sorrows. *Sentir cum Ecclesia*, therefore is my way of being a part of this people

This church with which we should be thinking and feeling is the home of all, not a small chapel that can only hold a small group of select people.¹⁸

¹⁸ Pope Francis and Antonio Spadaro, *My Door is Always Open: A Conversation on Faith, Hope and the Church in a Time of Change*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 49, 51.

<p>Avoid pessimism that leads to the despair of hopelessness or presumption that I can be transformed through my own personal efforts.</p>	<p>Place at the service of others my unique gifts and charisms received from the Holy Spirit. Avoid pride that my good works obviate my need for God's freeing grace.</p>
<p>Both faith and good works are gifts from God and complete each other.</p>	<p>Think of the Church as a 'field hospital'.¹⁹</p>
<p>Use our freedom of choice to select the most suitable means of development and recognise that the Holy Spirit empowers our capacity to choose.</p>	<p>Work for a Church and its ministries to be at the service of freedom. Be critical of all that dehumanises and oppresses.</p>
<p>Recognise that our motivations to love and serve God can be mixed and be grateful that God brings good out of our confused and conflicted desires.</p>	<p>'Don't be afraid when there is disorder provoked by the Spirit', Pope Francis said. One need fear 'only when it is provoked by our selfishness or the spirit of evil'.²⁰</p>

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach points out that the Exercises 'are meant to prepare ... the retreatant ... to live in relationship with the Body of Christ, the Church, sometimes harmonious, sometimes contentious'. They should connect us to the Church as a community of faith, hope and love that can practically inspire, heal and nourish all that gives praise and glory to the God of Jesus Christ: the fully alive human person. Spiritual direction for a synodal Church is not intended 'to develop a disincarnated and passive spirituality'.²¹

¹⁹ Pope Francis first used this image in an interview with Antonio Spadaro in September 2013. See A *Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 30–33.

²⁰ Cindy Wooden, 'A Church of the Many: Pope Francis Addresses Some Synod Questions, Fears', *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops* (25 May 2023), at <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/church-many-pope-addresses-some-synod-questions-fears>.

²¹ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach. 'The Rules for Thinking, Judging, Feeling in the Post-Conciliar Church'. *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* (CIS), 105 (2004), 3; see below, 44, 45. And see St Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 4.20.7.

Towards a Synodal Church

A year before his assassination in 1980, Romero wrote: ‘St Ignatius’ “to be of one mind with the church” would be “to be of one mind with the Church incarnated in this people who stand in need of liberation”.²² Romero was convinced that for Ignatius the Church is that which,

... the Holy Spirit is stirring up in our people, in our communities, a Church that means not only the teaching of the *magisterium*, fidelity of the pope, but also service to this people and the discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the gospel.²³

His own experience of the Spiritual Exercises and leadership in the Church are in agreement with Pope Francis and Kolvenbach that a ‘disincarnated and passive spirituality’ is not enough:

Retreats should measure their effectiveness by the renewal that they bring about in each person. It would not be sufficient for people to feel renewed only in their individual piety, forgiven their personal sins, and with the good feeling of a tranquil conscience. They must move from an individualistic piety to a communitarian piety, to a social awareness coming out of piety and experience of God.²⁴

Both the universal Church and local churches are engaged in fresh discernment about where and how the Spirit is leading us into the future. The Spiritual Exercises and, in particular, recontextualisation of Ignatius’ rules for thinking, judging and feeling with and for a post-Vatican II, synodal Church, can offer an important resource at this time. In the context of the spiritual direction relationship, Ignatius’ rules can strengthen a directee’s deep sense of the Church as the whole people of God—all of us, on a journey together through history. The experience of Ignatian spiritual direction cannot shy away from its responsibility to be of service to the transformative work of ecclesial reform in a synodal spirit, to serve the needs of our world and offer hope for the future.

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²² Oscar Romero. ‘Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises’, *The Way Supplement*, 55 (Spring 1986), 101.

²³ Romero, ‘Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises’, 103.

²⁴ Romero, ‘Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises’, 101.